

VOLUNTEERING  
INFRASTRUCTURE IN EUROPE  
PUBLICATION

# FRANCE



## 1. VOLUNTEERING INFRASTRUCTURE CONCEPT DEFINITION

The concept of volunteering infrastructure in France is still lacking a well-defined framework, therefore the most acceptable definition would probably be a rather general one, such as the United Nations Volunteers definition<sup>[1]</sup>, “systems, mechanisms and instruments needed to ensure an environment where volunteerism can flourish”, which was also discussed at the symposium “An enabling volunteering infrastructure in Europe: Situation – Trends – Outlook”<sup>[2]</sup>, organised by the European Volunteer Centre (CEV) in Malmö, Sweden, in October 2009.

In France there are two major conceptualisations of volunteering, namely:

*The concept of “Volontariat”* is used to name the four different forms of volunteer services that exist so far: international volunteering, military volunteering, civil service and fire service. The numbers of volunteers are important to the functioning of these sectors. For example, volunteer firefighters account for almost 200,000 “volontaires” alone<sup>[3]</sup>, equating to 79% of the national fire service personnel. These services are voluntary and call for altruistic engagement, but entail the payment of a stipend and benefits in kind. Specific laws and regulations provide a framework for these forms of volunteering, giving them also a formal legal status.

*The concept of “Bénévolat”* is used to name persons who engage voluntarily in altruistic activities without any financial retribution or material benefits. Bénévoles have no formal legal status, although their activities are ruled by a series of legal regulations. The number of bénévoles in France is around 20 million (2019 data)<sup>[4]</sup>. For the purpose of this report, the English term of “volunteer” will be used as a translation of the French concept of “bénévoles”.

Historically, volunteering in France had been mainly carried out within volunteer organisations (associations) and had no visibility of its own as a concept and even less as a movement. Volunteering was an act of activism within an organisation in which volunteers stayed for a lifetime contributing to a cause. The concept of volunteering/“bénévolat” began to be used first in the 1970s, always labelled as “militant bénévole” or “bénévole militant”. Social changes gradually got the concept of “bénévole” closer to the meaning of the Anglo-Saxon concept of “volunteer”, but it has not yet reached the same visibility in France as in other countries. Volunteer centres were founded very late in France (in the ‘70s) and did not do too well. They are more and more important nowadays because they fulfil a growing need. Volunteer involving organisations nevertheless remain the main voice of volunteering, and they see volunteering as an important element for their functioning.

[1] United Nations Volunteers (2005). *Developing a Volunteer Infrastructure – A Guidance Note*. Bonn: Bonner Universitäts-Buchdruckerei.

[2] CEV (2009). *An enabling volunteering infrastructure in Europe: Situation – Trends – Outlook, Final Report – Conference Conclusions*, General Assembly Conference, Malmö/Sweden, 15th-16th October 2009, Belgium: Imprimerie de Hoeilaart.

[3] Sapeurs-pompiers de France (2019). *Chiffres clés*. [online] Pompiers.fr.

[4] France Bénévolat/IFOP (2019). *L'évolution de l'engagement bénévole associatif en France, de 2010 à 2019*. Paris: France Bénévolat

## 2.VOLUNTEERING LANDSCAPE

In France, there is no official definition of volunteering. The definition most commonly used was put forward in a report<sup>[5]</sup> of the French Social and Economic Council in 1993 “*Le bénévole est celui qui s’engage librement pour mener à bien une action en direction d’autrui, action non salariée, non soumise à l’obligation de la loi, en dehors de son temps professionnel et familial.*” (The volunteer is a person who engages freely to carry out an action for the benefit of others, without remuneration and not subject to obligations under a law, outside of one’s work and family time). This definition was reached after a long debate within an organisation in which all segments of the French society were represented.

Volunteer work is therefore defined in opposition to paid, remunerated work. The main elements of the definition are: no salary or remuneration and the voluntary nature of the activity, entailing the lack of a juridical subordination. Volunteers, however, have to respect the statutes of the organisation they work for, as well as the security norms and regulations existing in their field of activity.

Official data on volunteering, produced by the national statistics institute<sup>[6]</sup> goes back to 2002 and indicates that there are 12 million bénévoles in France. A more recent survey commissioned by France Bénévolat from the French Institute for Public Opinion, Institut Français d’Opinion Publique (IFOP), published in March 2019<sup>[7]</sup>, indicates that there are 20 million French bénévoles engaged in voluntary activities, as follows: 13 million volunteers within volunteer organisations, 2 million in other organisations such as trade unions, political parties, religious organisations and 5 million engaged in informal volunteering within the community (outside of their families). In total, 38% of the French population aged 15 or older engages in volunteering activities of various kinds.

According to this IFOP Survey, people above the age of 65 are those who engage most as volunteers (31%), followed by the group aged 35 to 49 (23% of the population in this age group engages in volunteering). The engagement of young people, aged 15 to 34, is also quite high (22%). Engagement is at its lowest at the age of 50 to 64 (1 in 5 people). There are more female (52%) than male volunteers. However, it should be noted that women are under-represented in boards of directors and in leadership positions within voluntary organisations. Women have less time to offer to a voluntary cause, often due to familial roles, therefore it is more likely that they will respond to short-term and casual volunteer vacancies rather than ongoing leadership roles<sup>[8]</sup>. The study also shows that level of education and readiness to volunteer correlate.

[5] Marie-Thérèse Cheroutre (1989). *L’essor et l’avenir du bénévolat, facteur d’amélioration de la qualité de la vie*. Paris: Conseil économique, social et environnemental.

[6] Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (2002). *Vie associative et bénévolat en 2002 : tableaux issus de l’enquête PCV Vie associative et des indicateurs sociaux*. Paris: INSEE.

[7] France Bénévolat/IFOP (2019). *L’évolution de l’engagement bénévole associatif en France, de 2010 à 2019*. Paris: France Bénévolat.

[8] Recherches et Solidarités (2018). *La France bénévole 2018*. Paris: Recherches et Solidarités.

Volunteer organisations have a positive image in the French society and are largely considered as indispensable to society[9]. Public opinion indicates that citizens trust volunteer organisations more than politicians and public powers in numerous areas, such as animal protection and fighting against poverty[10].

### 3.LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR VOLUNTEERING AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION

While there is no specific law on “bénévolat” volunteering in France, there are some laws that regulate “volontariat”. Specific laws offer volontaires some rights and obligations, as well as requirements for undertaking “volontariat”. This is because “volontariat” takes place within specific structures, such as the civil and fire services, where volontaires are party to a contract and receive remuneration for their work.

However, “bénévolat” receives no legal status and volunteering in this form is considered a free, private activity. One rationale for the lack of legal status is that there is a widely shared general feeling that volunteer engagement (bénévolat) can take such a great variety of forms, that it is not desirable to try to put them all under one specific law. There are two main types of “bénévolat”: formal (within a formal structure such as a VIO) or informal (helping friends, family, neighbours, etc). But there is an agreement on the fact that the law ruling voluntary organisations[11] (VOs) should be preserved in its present form, as it offers a balanced legal framework for Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs).

There are also many legal acts concerning volunteering, in particular concerning labour regulations, for instance dispositions allowing staff to take time off for volunteering. Sometimes the lack of legal regulations creates some uncertainties, and a need to study jurisprudence before being sure about the legality of certain actions. VIOs are strictly controlled by tax and financial authorities, who may challenge volunteering activities if they consider that they might qualify as “disguised labour”. There is also a strict control on how grants (subventions) are spent by VIOs. Another area of strict control concerns the public fund-raising activities of VOs, such as collecting money in the street for a cause or calling for donations. The volunteering sector has set up its own body of peer-control, Le Comité de la Charte[12], and VIOs have the responsibility of respecting all these regulations affecting volunteering activities.

The ministry overseeing the non-profit sector in France at present is the Ministry of National Education and Youth (Ministère de L'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse).

[9] OpinionWay (2018). *Les Français et l'action associative*. Paris: Hello Asso.

[10] Kantar Sofres (2018). *Baromètre de la Confiance - Vague 11*. Paris: Comité de la Charte.

[11] Loi du 1er juillet 1901 relative au contrat d'association.

[12] <http://www.donenconfiance.org>

#### 4. STRUCTURE OF THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR INVOLVED IN VOLUNTEERING

The most relevant part of the non-profit sector, from the point of view of volunteer involvement, consists of volunteer organisations (VOs) and volunteer involving organisations (VIOs). The following sections refer only to this kind of organisation, leaving aside other structures such as foundations, cooperatives and mutual organisations. The VIOs sector is presently undergoing major changes. Currently, the main actors in the volunteering sector in France are:

*Benenova*<sup>[13]</sup> was created in 2013 in Ile-de-France, spreading to Nantes in 2014 and Lille in 2015. Its mission is to facilitate casual volunteering. That is to say, it advertises volunteering opportunities that require a minimal amount of time and commitment, allowing for short but effective volunteering experiences.

*Centres de Ressources et d'Information des Bénévoles (Volunteer Resource and Information Centres - CRIB)*<sup>[14]</sup> are local organisations that inform, advise, and support volunteers throughout their voluntary engagements. Originally created by public authorities to support volunteers in sporting VIOs, their remit expanded to include all types of voluntary activity in 2006, following the Conference on Associative Life.

*Conseil Economique, Social et Environnemental - CESE (Economic, Social and Environmental Council)*<sup>[15]</sup>. Since 1984, VIOs have been represented in this consultative assembly of the French government. VIOs can therefore have a say in all issues debated at the CESE, and they are able to put forward topics for discussions. The CESE has regional counterparts (CESR) in which local VIOs are also represented.

*France Bénévolat (France Volunteering)*<sup>[16]</sup> was created in 2003 by the merger of Planète Solidarité and the ailing Centre National du Volontariat, France Bénévolat is the largest national volunteer centre in France today, with 250 centres or counters nationwide, including 80 departmental centres. France Bénévolat fulfils three main functions: 1) brokerage between volunteer availability and demand 2) promotion of volunteering and 3) recognition of volunteering. It undertakes studies, commissions surveys and organises two large, annual conferences on different volunteering-related topics. It has developed tools for the recognition of skills and competences acquired through volunteering, for instance, the Volunteer Passport.

[13] <https://www.benenova.fr>

[14] <https://www.associations.gouv.fr/les-centres-de-ressources-et-d-informations-des-benevoles-crib.html>

[15] Conseil Economique, Social et Environnemental <https://www.lecese.fr>

[16] France Bénévolat <https://www.francebenevolat.org>

*Haut Conseil à la Vie Associative - HCVA (High Council for Associative Life)*<sup>[17]</sup> created in 2011, the HCVA replaced the Conseil National de la Vie Associative, formerly a consultative committee composed of VIOs and attached to the French prime minister. The HCVA's current task is to give expert advice to the government on issues concerning VIOs.

*Le Mouvement Associatif (The Associative Movement)*<sup>[18]</sup> in 2014 replaced the Conférence Permanente des Coordinations Associatives, which was founded in 1992 to promote the sector in its diversity and the development of civil dialogue in France. The Mouvement Associatif is currently active across 12 regions of France, representing 700 federations and more than 600,000 local organisations. As a national umbrella body, the Mouvement Associatif deals with cross-sectoral issues of voluntary organisations, representing and promoting their common interests towards public authorities and French institutions.

*Passerelles et Compétences (Gateways and Skills)*<sup>[19]</sup> is itself a VIO, founded in 2002, recognising the need for skilled volunteers in VIOs. The aim of the organisation is to connect skilled volunteers with VIOs requiring that have a need of certain skills in their activities. The organisation currently has 21 regional branches coordinating 6,500 volunteers and 2,500 VIOs.

*Tous Bénévoles (All Volunteers)*<sup>[20]</sup> is a Paris-based structure of volunteer centres, focused on e-techniques for volunteering brokerage. It also undertakes activities related to the promotion or recognition of volunteering, such as awards for youth volunteering. It runs a special program for volunteers involved in literacy programs called "Coeurs à lire".

The Regional centres of France Bénévolat are autonomous and independent organisations with their own governing bodies. They fulfil similar functions to the three roles described above for France Bénévolat, with different levels of efficiency. The national structure provides help and guidance for the regional centres when needed and there is cooperation and pooling of resources, in particular between local centres in the same region.

Generally, there used to be little cooperation between the different volunteering support- structures listed above. One of the collateral benefits of the European Year of Volunteering (EYV) 2011 has been a greater cooperation between them, in particular between France Bénévolat and Tous Bénévoles, as they contributed to the same preparatory meetings and were members of the same Alliance EYV-France.

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[17] Haut Conseil à la Vie Associative <https://www.associations.gouv.fr/hcva-237.html>

[18] Le Mouvement Associatif <https://lemouvementassociatif.org>

[19] Passerelles et Compétences <https://www.passerellesetcompetences.org>

[20] Touse Bénévoles <https://www.tousbenevoles.org>

Mouvement Associatif acts as an umbrella organisation for VIOs, working in different but well-defined fields of activity such as sports, culture, environment etc. Volunteer centres were not members of this structure, but France Bénévolat and Tous Bénévoles cooperated closely with Le Mouvement Associatif during the European Year of Volunteering, in the framework of the Alliance EYV-France. The idea of this Alliance was launched by France Bénévolat, but its secretariat was then taken over by the Mouvement Associatif, which as an advocacy body promoting issues that are common to associations, had the scope to promote volunteering, the common feature for the organisations.

The largest VIOs are active in fields such as sports, health care, first aid and medical assistance. Some of the most representative ones are the French Red Cross, Secours Catholique (French Caritas), Secours Populaire (a secular counterpart of Secours Catholique). It is difficult to know the exact number of volunteers in each structure. According to the survey commissioned by France Bénévolat from the Agency IFOP[21], there are 13 million French people who volunteer within VIOs, 2 million in other organisations such as trade unions, political parties, religious organisations, and 5 million who engage in volunteering in the community (outside their families), concluding that about 38% of the population aged 15 and over engages in voluntary activities.

VIOs cooperate with each other within the same sector, e.g. sports, youth, culture, social sector and structures such as Le Mouvement Associatif also facilitate cross-sectoral cooperation. Moreover, the French government periodically organises conferences, prepared by different working groups composed by voluntary sector representatives. Volunteer centres participate in such conferences and also remain involved in sectoral groupings. In addition, France Bénévolat has a standing committee uniting some of its most important partners amongst VIOs, with the aim of pooling information and resources as well as carrying out some prospective work.

## 5. OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

The other components of the non-profit sector, namely cooperatives and mutuals are partly managed by volunteers and provide voluntary activities.

*Public authorities* are mainly engaged in supporting and promoting the other form of volunteering, volunteering with a status (volontariat) by financing a large percentage of the monetary compensation they receive during their volunteering mission, whether these are missions overseas for humanitarian aid, missions in diplomatic service, civil service, fire service, etc.

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[21] France Bénévolat/IFOP (2019). *L'évolution de l'engagement bénévole associatif en France, de 2010 à 2019*. Paris: France Bénévolat.

However, the government seems to be increasing recognition of and engagement with the volunteering (bénévolat) sector as well. In response to 59 propositions put to the Prime Minister by Le Mouvement Associatif in 2018<sup>[22]</sup>, the Ministry of National Education and Youth has put together an action plan to develop volunteering policy and a French culture of philanthropy<sup>[23]</sup>. The measures include increased funding and tax credits for VIOs and simplifying administrative processes, among others.

Furthermore, public authorities (municipality, local authorities) also promote volunteering (bénévolat) through activities such as town twinning, actions that involve a great number of volunteers usually managed by a VIO subsidised by the municipality. Many local authorities have set up and are subsidising structures called Houses of Associations (Maison des Associations), aiming to facilitate the work of local VIOs by providing information, office space and equipment, meeting rooms and guidance to VIOs.

*Companies in France* have started to set up volunteering programmes for their own employees. Around 42%<sup>[24]</sup> of companies have, or intend to, set up partnerships with VIOs whereby employees are able to carry out voluntary work with the VIO during work hours. The employees are usually still remunerated by their own company as if it were a normal work day. When setting up these programmes, they sometimes seek advice from volunteer centres such as France Bénévolat. Businesses also establish sponsorships with VIOs, providing them with funding and material aid to help them carry out voluntary activity.

*Schools* are becoming more and more involved in the promotion of volunteering. Another positive result of the European Year of Volunteering 2011 was that the Ministry of Education allowed VIOs to launch an operation called “Ambassadors” in schools aiming at raising teachers and pupils’ awareness of volunteering.

Since then, the French government adopted in 2017 a programme<sup>[25]</sup> which obliges universities to recognise and validate students’ volunteering activities as part of their academic programme. This can take the form of validated credits towards the completion of their diploma, as well as facilitating voluntary activity with the opportunity to amend their student timetables, i.e. distance learning, alternative evaluation methods, etc.

[22] Le Mouvement Associative (2018). *Pour une politique de vie associative ambitieuse et le développement d'une société de l'engagement*. Paris: Le Mouvement Associative.

[23] Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse (2019) *Une ambition nouvelle au service de la vie associative : pour une société de l'engagement*. Paris: Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse.

[24] Le Rameau/MEDEF (2019) *Construire Ensemble – Guide Entreprises et Associations*. Paris: MEDEF.

[25] Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche et de l'Innovation (2019). *Valider votre vie associative et vos engagements dans un cursus*. Available at: <http://www.etudiant.gouv.fr/cid124477/valider-votre-vie-associative-et-vos-engagements-dans-un-cursus.html>

## 6. FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Much of the funding for volunteering comes from within the VIOs themselves by their members. This often takes the form of membership fees that must be paid in order to join. Other ways members can finance these organisations is in the form of financial and material donations. As well as directly donating a sum of money, members may also provide use of buildings, hardware, or software, for example, free of charge.

Furthermore, there are opportunities for fundraising to finance volunteering in France. This does not only refer to traditional fundraising activities such as the organisation of yard sales, raffles or sporting events, but the increasingly popular method of crowdfunding, through sites such as GoFundMe.com and ulule.com.

As previously mentioned, partnerships between companies and VIOs is becoming more frequent. As well as providing VIOs with human resources, allowing employees paid time off work to volunteer, companies also provide financial, material and logistical sponsorship to their partner VOs.

In terms of public funding, financial grants are available to registered VIOs, delivered by the State, public administrations, social security organisations, or local authorities. One such example is the Fonds pour le Développement de la Vie Associative (FDVA – Associative Life Development Fund)[26] which provides financial aid to VIOs for the training and development of their volunteers. In 2018 the government allocated 25 million euros to this fund. VOs can also seek funding from the European Union, either for a specific project or for the VO itself.

Fundraising activities represent the largest portion of VIO funding, at 66% (2017)[27]. Donations on the other hand represent only 5% of VIOs' budgets, with membership fees at contributing to 9% of VOs' finances. Finally, public funding had fallen from 34% in 2011 to only 20% in 2017.

## 7. REGULAR AND SYSTEMATIC RESEARCH

There is reliable research on volunteering in France but it is not carried out systematically. There are institutes conducting research in the field of volunteering, for example *Recherches et Solidarités*[28]. Universities are also active in research concerning the volunteering domain. Prominent academic researchers include Viviane Tchernonog and Edith Archambault of University Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, and Lionel Prouteau of University of Nantes., amongst others. These academic works are used by VIOs, but unfortunately organisations cannot influence the researchers' topic choice.

[26] Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse <https://www.associations.gouv.fr/FDVA.html>

[27] Viviane Tchernonog (2018) *Les Associations: État des lieux et évolutions – vers quelle secteur associative demain*. Paris: Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse.

[28] Recherches et Solidarités <https://recherches-solidarites.org>

The government has a specific fund for which VIOs can apply in order to carry out research on topics of their interest, but the sums are not substantial. The impact of volunteering is not constantly and properly measured. Voluntary organisations are advised to indicate in their budgets the monetary value of the volunteer work, merely as an indication. These amounts are approximate, calculated on the basis of the cost of the service if delivered by paid staff instead of volunteers. More regular research and statistics would be helpful in order to identify the targets and real issues, and therefore to develop the right programmes responding to real needs.

A VIO named La Fonda<sup>[29]</sup> serves as a useful database for finding research on volunteering themes, such as “VIOs and Business”, “VIOs and Democracy”, and “Social Innovation”, etc. The organisation publishes works from academic researchers, volunteer infrastructures such as HCVA, field experts, and civil servants.

### 8. ETHICS AND QUALITY STANDARDS FOR VOLUNTEERING

There are no formal ethical codes for volunteering in general. Individual VIOs have nevertheless developed different documents such as charters, in which the rights and responsibilities of volunteers engaging in these organisations are mapped out. There are two organisations that comprise those VIOs who want to respect ethical codes concerning donations: “*La Charte du Don en Confiance*” created in 1988 and currently certifying 91 organisations with the “Giving with confidence” label, and “*France Générosité*”<sup>[30]</sup> created in 1999 as a union now constituting 101 organisation members who carry out public fundraising campaigns.

### 9. AWARENESS OF VOLUNTEERING OPPORTUNITIES

France is lacking a national database of volunteers and volunteer opportunities.

Organisations such as France Bénévolat and Tous Bénévoles, at the national level, as well as other volunteer centres at a more local level, do however record volunteer opportunities in order to match them with people wanting to volunteer.

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[29] La Fonda <https://fonda.asso.fr/recherche>

[30] France Générosité <http://www.francegenerosites.org/>

There is no public policy to promote volunteering or communicate volunteering to the public at large on a regular basis. This is done occasionally, linked to particular events, such as the organisation of a national conference on the future of volunteer organisations, the EYV2011 Tour<sup>[31]</sup> stop in Paris, etc. Towards the end of 2017, French Prime Minister, Édouard Philippe, announced the government's intentions to launch the "National Week of Engagement" to occur in July 2018 to celebrate voluntary activity and engagement with VIOs. However, at the time of writing, there has been no follow up to this commitment. The promotion of volunteering is thus undertaken by each individual organisation according to its own policies and means.

National media is not very receptive to volunteering, except for very particular circumstances or events. Local media is more likely to carry items on volunteering, describing the activities of local volunteer organisations. The coverage generally sheds a positive light on volunteering but tends to concentrate on exceptional events.

### 10.ADDITIONAL COUNTRY SPECIFICITIES

All relevant country specificities have been outlined above.

### 11.RECOMMENDATIONS

In France, a distinction is made between mainstream volunteering (Bénévolat) and volunteering with a status (Volontariat). This is not the case elsewhere in Europe and permanently needs explanation. Yet it would be very useful to make this difference also at the European level when proposing helpful infrastructures for the development of volunteering, as the needs of these two forms of volunteering are not the same.

As already proposed in CEV's Manifesto for Volunteering<sup>[32]</sup>, we recommend the adoption of a status for "European Associations", considering that "such a status would enhance the visibility of the volunteering infrastructure organisations at the European level and would acknowledge their role in building a European identity, in fostering mutual understanding and building European social capital".

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[31] European Year of Volunteering, 2011 <http://europa.eu/volunteering/>

[32] European Volunteer Centre (2009). *European Elections Manifesto Do you engage for those who engage?* Brussels: CEV.

## Resources

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- Comité de la Charte [online] <http://www.donenconfiance.org> [Accessed 9 September 2019].
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